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Close but not too close: friendship as method(ology) in ethnographic research encounters.

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Journal of Contemporary Ethnography

Close but not too close: friendship as method(ology) in ethnographic research encounters

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Keywords:	Friendship as method, Emotion work, Confessional tales, Asthma
Abstract:	<p>"Friendship as method" is a relatively under-explored – and often unacknowledged – method, even within qualitative inquiry. In this article, we consider the use of friendship as method in general, and situate this in relation to a specific ethnographic research project, which examined the lived experience of asthma amongst sports participants. The study involved researching individuals with whom the principal researcher had prior existing friendships. Via forms of confessional tales we explore some of the challenges encountered when attempting to negotiate the demands of the dual researcher-friend role, particularly during in-depth interviews. To illustrate our analysis, four sets of tales are examined, cohering around issues of: 1) attachment and when to "let go"; 2) interactional "game-play"; "rescuing" participants; and 4) the need for researcher self-care when "things get too much". The limits of intersubjectivity and the need to guard against merger with research participants-as-friends are also addressed. In analysing the tales, we draw upon insights derived from symbolic interactional analyses and in particular upon Goffman's theoretical frameworks on interactional encounters.</p>

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Close but not too close: friendship as method(ology) in ethnographic research encounters

Introduction

As Douglas and Carless (2012) highlight, typically the traditional (positivist) paradigm requires a separation between the researcher/s and the participant/s, on the basis that any kind of personal involvement would: (a) bias the research, (b) disturb the natural setting, and/or (c) contaminate the results. Indeed, for those holding to a more “traditionalist” view of ethnography, all three of the above could be constructed as highly problematic. In contrast, along with other researchers (e.g. Hochschild 1983; Brackenridge 1999; Hoffman 2007) we contend that emotional involvement and emotional reflexivity can provide a rich resource for the qualitative researcher, rather than necessarily constituting a methodological “problem” to be avoided at all costs. In this paper, we draw upon “confessional tales” (van Maanen 2011) from an in-depth interview-based study undertaken by the first author, on the lived experience of asthma in sportspeople. As we know, the interview in general is a complex interactional context, requiring the researcher to handle several activities simultaneously: the dialogue has to be followed closely, and responses and attempts to change the direction of discussion have to be considered, anticipate and guided (Arendell 1997; Hoffman 2007). It also requires monitoring, both “logistically and emotionally” (Arendell 1997, 344) and the emotional dimension of interviewing emerged as highly salient in the study, from which our confessional tales are drawn.

According to Sparkes (1992), confessional tales are distinguishable by their highly personalised styles that emphasise and elucidate the researcher’s point of view. Such tales often aim at showing how a research study came into being, in ways that

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3 reveal some of the dilemmas and tensions encountered in the process, and also the
4 shocks and surprises (Sparkes 1992) that can confront the researcher. In this article,
5 we employ confessional tales in order to highlight some of the surprises, shocks, and
6 challenges of using “friendship as method” (Tillman-Healy 2003). We also discuss
7 the limits of intersubjectivity and the need to guard against lapsing into “merger”
8 (Frank 2005) with our participants; a lapse that can perhaps more easily occur when
9 using friendship as method, in contrast to more “distanced” methodological stances.
10 The article is structured as follows: we first consider the key tenets of “friendship as
11 method” (subsequently referred to without quotation marks for ease of reading),
12 before portraying briefly the research project from which our data excerpts are drawn,
13 and then proceeding to enter the confessional... It should be noted that we are not
14 offering a narrative analysis of the confessional tales in this particular paper. Our
15 purpose here is to respond to Kleinman and Copps’ (1993) call to reduce the “shock”
16 to neophyte qualitative researchers by discussing upfront the range of emotions at
17 play in fieldwork and, specifically, some of the challenges and emotion
18 work/emotional labor (see discussion below) involved in using friendship as method.
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41 **Friendship as method**

42 Within qualitative research, and particularly within fieldwork, friendship as method
43 has been employed in an attempt to *get to know* others in meaningful and sustained
44 ways (Fine 1994; Tillmann-Healy 2003). Although described as a “method”, perhaps
45 it would be more accurate to characterise this approach as methodological, given its
46 philosophical underpinnings which aim toward actively challenging, disrupting and
47 sometimes undermining what can be a considerable power imbalance between
48 researcher and participant, at least in many forms of research. The friendship
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approach seeks to reduce the hierarchical separation between researcher and participant (see Tillmann-Healy 2003 for a detailed overview), and is often accompanied by efforts at the establishment and maintenance of a dialogical relationship (Smith *et al.* 2009), and an ethic of caring that invites expressiveness, emotion and empathy (Fine 1994; Tillman-Healy 2003) between researcher and participants. This can, however, prove less straightforward and research-enhancing than might at first seem, as we discuss below.

Friendship involves “being in the world” with others (Tillmann-Healy 2003), and actively getting to know these “others”. It is described by Rawlins (1992) as an interpersonal bond characterised by the ongoing communicative management of dialectical tensions, such as those between idealisation and realisation, affection and instrumentality, and judgment and acceptance. As such it has certain similarities with forms of qualitative research, particularly those involving the development of rapport with participants over the longer term. Drawing on Weiss’ (1998) and Rubin’s (1985) work, Tillman-Healy (2003) further notes that friends come and stay together primarily through common interests, a sense of alliance, and emotional affiliation, and in friends we seek a gamut of elements such as trust, honesty, respect, commitment, safety, support, generosity, loyalty, mutuality, constancy, understanding, and acceptance. It is, however, usually unrealistic for a mutual, close and lasting friendship to develop between researcher and every participant in her/his study, drawing upon all these elements, particularly if there are substantial numbers of research participants.

There may also be sound ethical reasons for the ethnographic researcher to seek a less intimate and involved stance toward her/his participants, and it is important not to unduly “mislead” participants about the nature of our intentions in the research

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relationship (Tillmann-Healy 2003). There are, however, limits to the ways in which any researcher can ensure that her/his intentions are understood by participants in the way intended. As has been noted (Ellis 2007), friendship as method is not meant to be a guise strategically aimed at gaining further or deeper “access” to a participant’s inner world, but is a level of investment where researcher and friendship roles weave together, expand and deepen each other. As Ellis (2007) and Tillmann-Healy (2003) both note, ongoing and overlapping relationships in the research may make loyalties, confidences, and awareness contexts much more difficult for all to negotiate. Tillmann-Healy (2003) reassures us, however, that there is no need to adopt the “whole vision” to benefit from friendship as method, but that participants can be approached from a “stance of friendship”, treated with respect, human dignity, and their stories honoured, listened to with empathy, and used sensitively.

We fully acknowledge, however, that employing friendship as method does not of course negate or reduce all power imbalances, for example relating to gender (see Koivunen, 2010, for an interesting discussion), age, socio-economic class, ethnicity, degree of dis/ability, and so on. There are limits to the “democratisation” of the research relationship, process and product, even when our participants are fully acknowledged as co-producers of the research. Here our purpose is not so much to engage in theoretical debates about researcher-participant power relations, but rather to highlight some of the challenges encountered “on the ground”, in interactional encounters with interviewees with whom prior friendship relationships existed.

Garton and Copland (2010) suggest that prior relationships influence interpretations of power, breach interactional norms of interviewing, and that both interviewer and interviewee have to work hard to maintain the relevance of previous relationships. They argue that the closer the prior relationship, the harder the

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participants work to reconcile their diverse identities (Garton and Copland 2010). This, however, depends greatly, we would argue, on the nature of the extant relationship (including the degree of intimacy) prior to the research; the form of interviewing/research undertaken (including how in-depth this is); and the relative importance of the research relationship in the context of an ongoing friendship relationship. For example, the research encounter might constitute merely a brief and relatively unimportant episode in an ongoing deep friendship or alternatively may require long-term commitment to the project, involving the revealing of intimate, personal information.

Friendship as method, we argue, demands that as researchers we engage in acute and sustained reflexivity and self-scrutiny, contextually shifting between “studying them to studying us” (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 735). Our confessional tales provide reflections on the development and challenges of various research relationships developed during the asthma research project, and which, we hope, contribute insights for those contemplating the adoption of a friendship approach. These tales are also offered as a way to allow others to experience vicariously “something of the struggle and excitement of the research act” (Sparkes 1992, 72), within this particular methodological approach. The tales we have selected cohere around intense interactional research encounters concerning: (a) attachments; (b) interactional “game-play”; (c) “rescuing” participants; and (d) the need for researcher self-care. First, we provide brief details of the research project from which these confessional tales are drawn; for more detailed descriptions of this study, please see Author 1 (2008, 2009), Authors (2012).

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The research project

The ethnographic study involved the first author in undertaking in-depth, semi-structured to unstructured interviews with 14 non-élite sports participants, male and female, with ages ranging from 22 to 87 years, all of whom had been diagnosed with asthma by a medical practitioner, with asthmatic symptoms ranging in degree of severity. For some participants, for example, their asthma did not interfere to any great extent with everyday life, including sports and physical activity participation and performance, whilst for others the severity of their asthma severely impacted upon everyday life, and even required hospital admission. Recruitment of participants was via purposive, criteria sampling, initially using convenience sampling in terms of having access to friends and colleagues with asthma, subsequently supplemented by a snowballing process (Patton 2002, 237). The key criteria for selection were: i) having received a medical diagnosis of asthma; ii) receiving ongoing medical treatment for asthma; iii) being currently an active sportsperson or a retired sportsperson. Via this approach, 14 participants were selected, 10 of whom were active sportspeople (4 males; 6 females), and 4 of whom were retired sportspeople diagnosed with late onset asthma (2 males; 2 females). The project was approved by the relevant University ethics committee. The confessional tales were written up as part of the original study, rather than as separate postscripts. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and identifying characteristics have been removed from the accounts as far as possible, whilst leaving sufficient detail to provide contextualisation.

Confessional tales from the field

In the following accounts, we use the first-person as relating to the first author, “H”.

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Attachments: When to let go

Olena was an “acquaintance friend” H knew from College where sport was a common ground of interest. H vaguely remembered Olena as having trouble with her asthma and so made contact with her early on in the data collection process. Olena was in her early twenties and self-confessed as “sports mad”, particularly regarding football. H decided to go and stay with Olena for the weekend, and was picked up from the train station. The following narrative was drafted from H’s fieldnotes, and the interview extract was transcribed verbatim.

We jump in her Ford X and she drives me to her flat, showing me the history of the place on the way. She is quite the proud patriot and knows a lot about the area. As we enter her flat, we are met with a floating chilli aroma; a cue for her to serve up dinner. I am starving after such a long journey and eagerly accept a bowlful as we both slouch on the sofa chomping away. We have a quick game of guitar hero before settling down and starting our interview. This seems to go well and the next day she shows me round her hometown. After going out for an evening together, I asked Olena if she could repeat a few of the stories she had told me, for the benefit of the recorder.

H: And what were you saying about being in the pub? When you were drinking with your mates you were saying how you’re not disabled...?

O: [Laughs] No, me and my mates and we were just chatting away and they were like, “Well you are partly disabled because of your chest, it stops you doing so much” and I’m like, “I’m not disabled, I’m not disabled. I can do anything you do, I just have to do it a different way” and just walked straight into the disabled toilets [laughs].

H: [laughs]

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O: Yeah and they're like, "oh good one" [laughs].

H: And what about when your friends were telling you that you shouldn't be smoking?

O: No, they just tell me I shouldn't be doing it, but it's not for them to tell me what I should and shouldn't be doing. They just worry about my welfare. But it's like... I don't care what they think. I want to do what I'm not allowed to do. Well, not what you're not allowed to do, what you're not advised to do. It's just... I don't smoke a lot, it's just when I get very drunk, which isn't actually often. Probably maybe 6 cigarettes a year throughout, not even whole cigarettes, so it's like... not a huge amount but then it's... enough I guess.

H: But you say it doesn't affect you?

O: It *does*. I feel it a *lot* afterwards, like I need to take my nebulisers... Not proud of it, but it's something that... happens.

After spending the weekend with Olena, I left with her still enthused to participate. I send a text to Olena when I return home, thanking her for such a lovely weekend and tell her that I'll be in touch. I also thank her for the email she sent me. I text her 2 times to see how her diary is going, but I do not receive a reply so after about a month I send her another email. I hear nothing. I discuss this with my research supervisor and consider some reasons for the lack of response. My supervisor urges me not to blame myself, and notes that these things do happen in research, however upsetting it may be to us as researchers. But I just cannot help blaming myself. I feel that perhaps on the last day I might have pushed her into "admitting" things that she might have felt discredited

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her. So I try again giving her the opportunity to take out anything that she might feel uncomfortable with and send an email:

Hi Olena,

How's things? Haven't heard from you in a while so hope you are well and your nursing is going well. You are probably really busy with all of that understandably!

Just thought I would email you the interview transcript so you can have a read through it. Feel free to edit anything if you are uncomfortable with anything that you said or would like it amended or removing from the record. Would be great to hear back from you, and thanks again for getting involved in the research and your great hospitality over the weekend. I really appreciate all the effort you put in.

Best wishes, H.

I send Olena a text to say that I have sent her an email and I would appreciate a response.

I hear nothing.

I think over and over and over the whole weekend that I spent with her. I think we had a good time. We took lots of photos and she seemed like she enjoyed showing me round the place. I cannot understand why she is ignoring me. I feel hurt and upset that I invested so much into the weekend and whilst she did too, she has not kept her word. The weekend was really hard work and I feel really let down. I think long and hard about why she might have retreated from the research.

I do not contact her again – I have to “let it go”.

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On reflection and in mutual discussions, we wonder if perhaps H had “spoiled” the relationship by pushing Olena to disclose this final piece of potentially discrediting information for the benefit of the recorder. Olena’s comment about not being proud of her actions leads us to ponder that she might have regretted opening up too much and that what she had confided to H in the pub should perhaps have stayed there and not been formally recorded. Because of her role as an “asthma ambassador”, perhaps Olena might have felt that her disclosures particularly “discredited” (Goffman 1963) her, despite H’s reassurances about confidentiality. This presented an ethical conundrum in the research: Olena agreed to have her comments recorded and included in the research write-up, and we are not of course sure whether it was the disclosure of this element of her behaviour that caused Olena to withdraw from further contact with H; this is merely our conjecture, it could have been something entirely different. But with hindsight, would Olena have wished her comments to be removed from the “formal” record? Our compromise has been to remove most of the distinguishing features from Olena’s account in order to enhance anonymity, but perhaps other researchers would have felt and done differently...

This research instance also brought to mind Goffman’s (1974) concept of “lamination” as apposite in considering how the roles of interviewer and interviewee become laminated on to existing relationships and brought into the interactional play. “Laminations” (Goffman 1974) can be viewed as layers of communication and meta-communication in which information from multiple channels becomes available during any given interaction. This can include information available via “out of frame” activity (for example, a pub conversation), activity which stands outside of the “official” rationale for the current interaction (such as a research interview). In the

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interview situation, both interviewer and interviewee, who are known to each other via friendship roles, may work hard to maintain a previous role identification if it is meaningful and important. By adding to our existing roles as friends we may have to work hard to maintain the relevance of previous relationship in the context of the research interviewer-interviewee relationship. There is an overlapping of “framings” and a deepening of layers in the relationship. This can prove uncomfortable for some, and a deepening of layers does not of course guarantee that a positive change in relationships will occur, nor necessarily that greater depth of data or access to some “real” inner participant-self will follow. In Goffman’s (1981, 128) concept of “changes in footing”¹, interactional negotiations can reveal much about how the participants see themselves and each other, and such revelations may not be possible without the prior history that interviewer and interviewee share. Our next example highlights the difficulties involved with such “changes in footing”.

Interactional “game-play”: struggles for control

I met Ivor through a mutual friend and when the research started we had been “friendly acquaintances” for about a year. At the beginning of the research, Ivor was 47years old. He used to be a headteacher, but had a car crash that changed his life significantly. I am particularly wary of the “researcher effect” with Ivor, as his asthma - and his life - are complicated by neck pain and also psychological issues. He tells everyone to whom he introduces me that I am doing a PhD on him, which always makes me feel uncomfortable. He is quite “quirky” and I think he has a view of himself as quite “extraordinary”. Ivor developed “adult onset asthma” which seems to coincide with his accident and so this trauma was something we explored in

¹ Goffman (1981, p.128) states that ‘A change in our footing implies a change in the alignment we take up...[and] a change in our footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame for events’.

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terms of “triggering off” his asthma. Our first interview took place in a pub, where he seemed constantly distracted by the waitress and it seemed that he was trying to shock me by saying outrageous things during this first initial encounter. I felt that he was reluctant and resistant to the whole process despite expressing a great deal of enthusiasm beforehand. The interview started with a degree of interactional “unease”, and seemed to involve somewhat of a struggle for control.

H: So tell me a bit about yourself

Ivor: Who I was or who I am? [rather “challenging tone”]

H: [Laughs] Are you going to make this as difficult as possible for me?

I: No, I just want to understand the question.

H: Oh okay, well tell me a bit about you, if that incorporates who you were, a bit of background would be good.

I: Me. A bit of background about me...

On reflection, H feels she may have anticipated that Ivor might be a little “difficult” because of their prior relationship, and notes that her response was quite defensive. Nonetheless, throughout the interview Ivor finished his answers abruptly with: “Any further questions?” or “Next question!”, constantly heightening mutual awareness of the interview context and engaging in a degree of “role distancing” in Goffman’s (1961) terms. For example:

I: I’ve just hit my nose... with the Guinness glass.... Do other people take it more seriously? These interviews?

H: I think you’re taking it seriously enough.

I: That’s alright, I was just worried about the Guinness glass on nose bit.

H: Oh no that’s alright.

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For Goffman (1961), the concept of role distance refers to the interactional gap between role obligation and role performance, and also to contexts where the social actor brings to bear on the current social situation other elements of her/his other repertoire of roles. In the above instance, Ivor shows in the interview that he is both “in” and “out” of interviewee role, at times taking a step back to reflect on his own performance as an interviewee (and H’s as interviewer), and thus demonstrates a certain distance from that particular role, which he is not taking too “seriously”. He indicates to H that he is aware of the role obligations of being an interviewee, and questions (somewhat ironically) whether he is fulfilling those obligations adequately - by hitting his nose with a beer glass.

H found this one of the most challenging of her interviews, in which there appeared to be a lot of interactional “game play”. The interview was replete with tensions, and efforts to take control by both parties. Ivor seemed to have a strong need to remind both participants of the friendship relationship existing prior to the interview. H was already aware of how Ivor *might* perceive the interview situation, power relations and her role as an academic researcher, which is one of the reasons she opted to “dress down” and select very informal attire. Ivor immediately comments on H’s appearance and “status”, to which H responds in a bantering manner:

- I: I hope you don’t shrink anymore.
- H: No, no I won’t.
- I: But obviously as I dream of you daily, I’d imagined you bigger and obviously the more I dreamed of you the bigger you got.... That’s why they put statues on pedestals because you have to look up.

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H: And then you see me in real life and I'm more humble than ever.

I: Mmm, like some little old lady. Walking into the pub with her microphone. Hello... may I talk to you?

Whilst Ivor's comments were of a teasing nature and part of the preliminary interview banter, H was nevertheless made aware that he might have found her position as interviewer somewhat threatening, shifting the power balance in their former "equal" relationship to one where H could have more power in the interview context. Ivor also appeared to be defensive about revealing his feelings in the interview, an element which Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002) highlight in terms of interviews presenting a threat to the masculine self when men are asked to reveal their feelings. When Ivor was asked directly (perhaps too directly and too early on, with the benefit of hindsight) about his feelings, he initially found the question difficult:

H: How did you feel about that?

I: Er, yeah--. How did I feel? You sound like an interviewer. Just, somebody's just blown up, how do you feel?

There was a sarcastic edge to much of the interview conversation, and H sometimes found it difficult to keep up with Ivor's train of thought. He changed "footing" (Goffman, 1974) frequently, by changing the topic, especially when H suspected he was feeling uncomfortable. He also requested to stop for breaks when he was experiencing pain. For example:

I: It's easier to deal with pain than when you're on your own and.... and down... Next question!

H: So how do you cope with pain?

I: Do you want a song now or shall I? [pauses for 2 seconds] Shall we break into small song?

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3 H: A song?
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5 I: No... I, no, I've had all sorts of amazing help with pain management.
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10 The first research encounter with Ivor was therefore experienced as involving
11 something of a power struggle, and was also very disjointed. The new researcher-
12 participant relationship seemed to constitute a challenge for both interviewer and
13 interviewee, perhaps because it disrupted pre-existing power balances. It may have
14 been that Ivor “tested” so frequently H’s abilities as an interviewer and engaged in
15 role distancing work in order to assert his power in the interview, to protect his
16 “masculine identification” (Allen-Collinson 2011, 112) from the “threat” perceived as
17 posed by a younger female interviewer. As Koivunen (2010, 683) notes, power and
18 gender inter-relate in interesting ways in cross-gender research situations. Having
19 examined some of the power dynamics and interactional game-playing in the
20 interview situation, we now proceed to consider boundary-crossing in research
21 encounters.
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39 ***Boundary-crossings***

40 Despite exhortations for ethnographic researchers to “get in close” to, and empathise
41 with their participants, there might conversely be sound ethical reasons for
42 maintaining a degree of distance between researcher and researched. Smith et al.
43 (2009), for example, warn of the risks that “crossing boundaries” and seeking
44 “merger” with participants may pose in qualitative research contexts. To ground their
45 argument, they present two narratives, based on actual research encounters, posing
46 questions regarding “how close is too close?” “how far is too far?” vis-à-vis research
47 relationships. They also remind us that such questions are never straightforward, but
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are: “complex and shift in time and space, ebbing and flowing, as people move between merging and unmerging, self-sufficiency and non-self-sufficiency” (Smith et al. 2009, 342). The following confessional tale focuses upon boundary-crossing and re-crossings, with regards to inter-corporeality and touch as well as intersubjectivity, and similarly raises questions regarding “how close is too close?” in researcher-as-friend relationships. We return to H’s relationship with Ivor.

“Rescuing” participants: I cannot save him

I’m not sure that we should be sitting on Ivor’s bed doing the interview, but he is in such pain and needs to lie down. He lies down on one side of the bed and I sit on the other side and place the recorder in the middle, on the panda, which is sitting between us. I am concerned about his pain and about “crossing lines” but we’re good friends and during this second interview, Ivor says that he “must do more of these interviews every day. It feels definitely like breakfast television”. I laugh and he continues, “But we’ve got the protective panda between us so nobody can cross the line”. It seems that Ivor is aware of these concerns as well. He seems much more relaxed during this interview, despite his pain. He seems much more vulnerable today and tells me that his operation is in four weeks. He says:

“I’m scared. I’m not scared of many things. I used to be scared when I mountaineered but that’s why I did it. This is a different sort of scared, cos it’s not me who’s clinging onto the rock and moving me feet, it’s somebody else aaaand... I don’t think it’s because it hasn’t been done very many times, it’s just cos... I think I’m scared of it not working. Um... because I don’t really want to be in this--, this is a last resort thing.”

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I'm scared too. I'm scared of what he'll do if it doesn't work. I worry that his jokes in the past are not jokes. Perhaps he really will "cut his head off with a machete" (as he once threatened to do) and perhaps he will kill himself if this doesn't work (also threatened). I'm scared. He continues:

"I think last time I had a major operation, which is when I went to X, I was so low and so ill I didn't actually care what the result was, because I had no quality of life at all, because I couldn't really move or do anything so... there was nothing to lose, but now I've got... a reasonable quality of life at the moment [...] and my children. [...] I wouldn't wanna lose that."

Four weeks pass and H sends Ivor a text to see how he is progressing post-operation. He calls H, which is rather a surprise, and, for a split second, she wonders whether she should answer. She answers. Ivor is high on painkillers and completely delirious. H worries about saying the "right things" so just listens instead. He probably just needs to hear a familiar voice and for somebody to listen, somebody to care. H reflects that this is probably not within her role as a researcher, but he is a friend as well, and a friend would check to see if he is alright. So she does. Ivor ends the conversation and H breathes heavy sighs of relief; relief that he has woken up after the operation, and relief in the *hope* that she has not said anything wrong... but she then sits silently, stunned, feeling numb and starting to worry about how he will recover. The following week H goes to visit Ivor at his home, unsure as to how prepared she is for this particular encounter, which is probably far outside the role of a researcher. But he's a *friend*; she feels it to be her duty as a *friend*. She knows she

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has also to bear in mind her role as a researcher in this process; a difficult interactional balancing act.

The visit begins:

I walk into the lounge and see him lying spread out on the floor with the cricket playing on TV. I sit down on the floor next to him, smiling to him on the outside but panicking on the inside.

"I brought you a pressi," I say passing him the pick 'n' mix.

"Awww... just what I wanted!", he exclaims turning his head towards me.

"It's the little things".

I'm pleased. "So, how are you feeling?", I ask tentatively.

"Like shit!", he replies, "But better now you're here and my Mum's coming in a bit. My sister's been tidying up, her OCD comes in handy sometimes!"

He starts telling me about his operation. All of this is also exacerbating his asthma and during our conversation he has a coughing fit and takes his inhaler.

Afterwards, he shows me his neck. "Look!" he says turning his head. I see the shaved patch on the back of his head where the red swelling stitching trails up his neck. He turns, telling me about where the surgeons planted the box into his stomach. He grabs my hand, pulls his top up and places my hand on his ballooned stomach. I feel a hard lump poking out of is fleshy stomach; it feels weird. I see it poking out. I don't want to pull my hand away, because I don't want to offend him, but I feel physically sick. I feel immense sympathy for him but I feel that he doesn't want sympathy from me. I think sympathy would offend him.

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As Frank (2005) highlights, boundaries are culturally- (and we would add, sub-culturally) defined conventions separating what is close and “of us”, on “our side” of the boundary, from what is construed as more distant, not “of us”, somehow different, “other”, less approachable. Boundaries are, for Frank (2005), a fundamental part of human relations, including research relationships, where qualitative researchers in particular have to consider and negotiate how close they come to research participants without risking colonisation of the “other”. Conversely, keeping a social distance, and standing aside and apart from our research participants also brings risks and costs, including endangering or compromising carefully established trust and rapport with participants. As highlighted in H’s account above, as a friend she feels a duty of friendship and care in relation to Ivor, particularly when she sympathises (and empathises) with his fear, pain and suffering.

Over-empathising can, however, engender its own dangers, if researchers lapse into “merging” with participants. As has been noted (e.g. Bakhtin 1990; Smith et al. 2009) avoiding such mergers with others is important in sustaining a degree of “difference” and respecting others’ perspectives. Although construing others as “different” can clearly have very negative consequences, it also has positives in according space to research participants to express their own unique experience and to have this acknowledged as such. Using suffering as an example, Bakhtin (1990, 102) argues that: “the *other’s* suffering as co-experienced by me is in principle different ... from the other’s suffering as *he* [sic] experiences it”. In the research dyad researcher and participant remain different, not necessarily *apart*, but nevertheless distinct social actors. As Clark and Holquist (1984, 78) relatedly argue: “I ‘live into’ an other’s consciousness; I see the world through the other’s eyes. But I must never completely meld with that version of things”, otherwise the degree of difference required for

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dialogue would be lost. Analogously, Frank (2004) argues that seeking to merge with the other might at first sight seem a “generous” act, but actually risks losing the mutual otherness required to sustain the boundary between people, generating a fundamental condition for dialogue: that it occurs between persons who remain mutually other. As Smith et al. (2009) note also, maintaining the space between people is thus key not only in understanding how humans relate to each other, but also for acting *generously*. It is important to acknowledge that however much of the research field we share with our participants, our experiences are never quite the same, we must be wary of *assuming* commonality of experience. As Allen-Collinson (2012, 199) argues, there are limits to intersubjectivity, there are times of existential loneliness and despair, which even the most supportive and caring of life-world sharers cannot share. It would be presumptuous to assume that we know another’s experience, and also to assume that s/he wants our sympathy, as H highlights in the account above.

Emotion work: When things get too much

Our final confessional tale centres upon the “emotion work” (Hochschild 1979) involved in friendship as method, and focuses upon H’s relation with Eve, whom she met when Eve was visiting her university department. Eve had a number of health problems but it was asthma that seemed to have the most impact on her career direction and sports participation. Eve revealed that her asthma had “flared up” immediately after she had been involved in a serious car crash. H found listening to Eve describe the experiences of the car crash and her subsequent flashbacks highly disturbing, rekindling memories and flashback experiences of her own. The following account describes the struggles she had with managing her own emotions

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during, and following an emotionally-charged interview, and also highlights the need for researcher self-care (Rager 2005), and having another kind of researcher-friend, a “friend-to-researcher”.

I leave the Research Unit session feeling exhausted. The emotional work was extremely hard during the session. I feel relieved when the session is over and I can escape feelings of entrapment and discomfort. I know I need to start preparing for my interview with Eve, but I haven’t left myself much time to recover emotionally. We’ve organised to meet in the café on campus because she is an X student, which is how we met. I’m a bit nervous about it, because I keep thinking about noise and other people intruding on our interview. But when we meet we find a quiet spot in the corner on the sofas and it feels OK. The interview seems to be flowing well... but then she starts going into some detail about a car crash she was involved in. It’s incredibly difficult to hear and I start feeling angst about what she is telling me, especially when she talks about flashbacks:

“Yeah you have to have had um... like flashbacks, nightmares... um... like intrusive memories... and all that for... I think it’s, it’s 3 or 6 months before they can diagnose you with post-traumatic stress disorder otherwise it’s just the reaction of the incident...”

I start fearing my thoughts. My thoughts about my own intrusive memories, my own flashbacks, but I had never labeled them with such terminology. It triggers my memories of the night terror I had during last year. I try and “park” these thoughts while we carry on with the interview. But I struggle through the interview – the car park in my head is becoming more like a multi-story car park and I need to drive some cars out of it before it becomes full, but at the

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moment they're whizzing round and round trying to find a space. I can't help thinking about post-traumatic stress, the intrusive memories and flashbacks. I've never really thought about applying these things to myself... I realise that I'm struggling, so I try and draw the interview to a close after about an hour and a half by asking her if she would mind filling in a diary when she goes away on her holiday. She agrees and we arrange to meet again when she gets back. I say goodbye and feel relieved that I was able to maintain a brave face and keep it all together (I think!).

Afterwards, H walks back to her office, feeling dazed and muddled. She starts to feel lost and panicky and knocks on her supervisor's door - thankfully she's still in.

"Come in," I hear J call.

I open the door and stand apprehensively by the doorway, trying my utmost to hold it together, but I can't. She looks up at me, concerned.

"Um, I've just had an interview and er...", I can't finish my sentence and burst into tears. I completely break down in J's office and start sobbing, crumbling in front of her. I fall into the comfy chair beside her desk and she listens kindly and patiently as I blurt out how hard the last interview was. I'm not used to such kindness, such patience; I keep waiting for her to change her tone, to tell me off, to kick me out, but she doesn't. I start feeling guilty, guilty about how little she knows about me; surely when she finds out, they'll will wish they had chosen someone else for this project. I tell her how bad I feel about myself, how ashamed I am and how difficult I am finding all this. I bury my head in my hands, in shame.

"Aw, H", she reaches out to me. "Have you thought about going on a break?", she suggests gently rolling her chair closer.

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The suggestion horrifies me, but... perhaps she is right. That interview was too deep – I wasn't ready. Maybe I have been doing too much. It feels all too much today and I feel that I can't handle it all. I'm not ready to handle other people's trauma without dealing with my own first. I didn't even realise I had any of my own to deal with... until today.

Adopting a sociological-phenomenological perspective (Allen-Collinson 2009), H's realisation that she has trauma "issues" with which she must deal accords with phenomenological work on trauma and its aftermath. Gusich (2012), for example, notes that we encounter a traumatic situation and may participate in it, but we simply cannot believe what is happening to us, and such non-believing is a willful and self-protective act. Gusich (2012, 506-7) argues that "our value judgment of the situation is so negative and dire that it is only by withholding our assent from the cognitive judgment that founds (or interfunctions with) it that we can protect ourselves from the devastation..." H's encounter with Eve triggers vivid memories, long buried, of her own traumatic experiences and the terrifying flashbacks they generated. She realises in the midst of the interview that she is beginning to process such memories, and engaging in an "exploration of this inner dialogue and the connections with the outer dialogue" (Simon 2013, 3) of the interview, H has to work hard at maintaining focus on her role as interviewer, struggling to engage in the "emotion work" required.

Hochschild (1983) makes a helpful analytic distinction in employing the term "emotional labour" with regard to paid labour, where there is: "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*" (1983, 7; italics in original). In

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contrast, she uses the terms “emotion work” or “emotion management” to refer to acts carried out in a private context where they have *use value*. In the above example, this distinction is, however, somewhat blurred and problematised, for although H is in a work context in so much as she is interviewing as part of a research project, she is also in the role of friend-interviewer. The purposes of managing her tumultuous emotions during the interview are therefore multiple and fluctuating; not purely “professional” and sold for economic benefit, nor purely “private” as part of the friendship work within a personal relationship. Such role fluctuations are, we argue, at the very heart of the friendship as method approach, and as Hoffman (2007, 318) points out, exploring the emotional labour/emotion work undertaken in qualitative interviews actually generates important data.

Deliberations on friendship as method

In this article, we have considered the friendship as method approach within qualitative inquiry; an approach currently under-explored. Selected confessional tales drawn from a recent study of the lived experience of asthma amongst sports participants were used to illustrate our analysis. As we noted, some of the challenges confronting the researcher who adopts a friendship approach can be considerable. Our analysis focused in particular upon issues of attachment/detachment and “letting go” when, despite best efforts to sustain the research relationship and beset by feelings of loss and rejection, it was eventually deemed appropriate to let go of a participant and move on. We then considered an instance of interactional “game-play” where an interviewee engaged in role distancing as part of a perceived attempt to engage in a meta-analysis of the interview process itself, frequently highlighting the friend element of the researcher-friend role and critiquing the researcher role. The

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need for researcher self-awareness and self-care was explored in two tales: “rescuing” participants and “when things get too much”. In the “rescuing” tale, H as researcher confronted the limits of intersubjectivity and empathy, and sought to avoid the dangers of merger with one of her participants. In “too much” we addressed the need for “emotion work” and self-care in using friendship as method.

Negotiating the dual role demands of friend and researcher can be demanding and even stressful for researchers. Listening to stories that are emotionally laden and troubling, for example, can have a powerful effect on any researcher (Brackenridge 1999; Rager 2005) and this can be exacerbated where a friendship relationship is also involved, and the researcher feels a greater duty of care to her/his participant. This also raises issues of attachment and detachment, considerations in many ethnographic research projects, but which may be complicated by the friendship as method approach where an ongoing friendship has to be negotiated post-research project. At times, H felt keenly the responsibility for making decisions about which of her friend or researcher roles to prioritise at any given interactional moment, and how to balance their competing demands, particularly with the potential for significant consequences in relation to the research and/or the friendship.

Given the challenges highlighted in the foregoing account, we might well ask: why engage at all in an approach that appears to harbour so many difficulties and interactional complexities and complications? Why should the ethnographer give her/himself additional difficulties right from the outset? With the benefit of hindsight, would we advocate the friendship as method approach to others? Despite the challenges, we remain committed to the friendship approach - in appropriate circumstances. We agree with Tillmann-Healy (2003) that this method can challenge the putative hierarchical separation between researcher and participant, and assist in

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the construction and maintenance of a more “dialogical” research relationship (Smith et al. 2009; Simon 2013). Using the friendship approach invites expressiveness, emotion and empathy (Fine 1994; Tillman-Healy 2003) between researcher and participants, and this *may* also generate richer data. Douglas and Carless (2012) argue that reciprocity, supportiveness, and care are critical within qualitative research in general, in order to build a trusting relationship with a participant, so that s/he can feel safe to be open and forthcoming, and this applies particularly to the researcher-friend role.

Many of the intense, emotional and “performed interactions” (Ezzy 2010) portrayed above would most likely not have occurred, had a more “distanced” research approach been adopted. Whilst many of the encounters were indeed challenging in seeking a balance between attachment and needing to “back off” (Smith et al. 2009), and in negotiating loyalties, we agree with Douglas and Carless (2012) that despite the challenges, the kinds of relationships such “insider” status offers can lead to valuable and even unique insights. The complexity and negotiation of roles and different “voices” can add multi-layered texture, richness and emotional depth to the interview as lived interactional experience. For some participants in the above project, we are convinced that without some prior, shared “biography of friendship”, their more personal and sensitive revelations made would not have been made. Caution is needed, however, in assuming any straightforward link between depth of friendship and depth of data. The friendship approach might initially seem like an “easier” way to establish a more democratic, inclusive research relationship, a way to achieve a more balanced, “genuine” interaction, to build rapport and trust, and thus to generate richer data. As we have highlighted above, however, it can raise a raft of complex interactional issues and leave both researcher and participant more

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vulnerable to each other, including vulnerability to loss and rejection when more of “self” is invested in a friendship relationship that subsequently terminates. The researcher who adopts a friendship as method approach thus needs to consider carefully the “ethics of care” not only in relation to participants, but also in relation to her/himself.

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